

## **Challenges of Semien Mountains National Park Extension: Life Experiences and Viewpoints of Relocated Communities from Arkwaziye Village, North Gondar, Ethiopia.**

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### **Abstract**

*The establishment of parks with exclusive approach, which excludes people who live within the park, as a green development strategy is practiced across the world. Similarly, Ethiopia is working much in a similar fashion. This research dealt with the life experiences and viewpoints of relocated communities from Arkwaziye village that lived so far in and around Semien Mountains National Park as a major objective. The study employed qualitative research method with a cross sectional design. To do so in depth interview, observation, key informant interview and different document review were held. The dislocation of people living in and around the Semien Mountains National park since its establishment attributed to the endangerment of endemic species according to the government is a common phenomenon. However, the relocated communities of Arkwaziye who dismantled from their native area due to the extension of the Semien Mountains National Park territory angrily responded against this measure. They believed that the government blindly decided to purge them was done without their consent and consideration of their future life. Accordingly, these people believed that the government measure of expanding the Semen Mountains National Park was not attributed to rational development plan as advocated. That is why dislocated communities faced with social disruption, isolation, landlessness, homelessness and economic crisis. Thus, the government should oversee the relocation program conducted so far and rethink of the plan going to be conducted in the future.*

**Key words:** Relocation, Extension, Semien Mountains National Park.

### **Introduction**

Ethiopia is situated in East Africa (Bahru, 2002) with a mosaic of people and culture immersed in long history. The country is not only rich in culture and historical heritages it is also endowed with rich biodiversity and impressive landscapes. Owing to this, UNESCO has registered eleven cultural and natural heritages as world heritage sites (ACTPDB, 2009).

As part of natural heritages, Ethiopia has established protected areas in different parts of the country for biodiversity, wildlife, and forest conservation. Semien Mountains National Park is one among the other natural heritages tourist attraction sites and economic source in the tourism industry of Ethiopia. Semien Mountains National Park (SMNP) is situated in North Gondar Zone, an administrative subdivision of Amhara National Regional State in north central Ethiopia. The park covers 412 km<sup>2</sup> surrounded by five district administrations namely Debark, Janamora, Adi-Arkay, Telemt and Beyeda. Due to its high and importance biodiversity, high number of endemic species, outstanding physical features and exceptional natural beauty, UNESCO registered it in 1978 as a world heritage site (ACTPDB, 2009; Berihun, 2011).

Eradicating extreme poverty and hunger are stated as the first goal, among other eight pillars of millennium development goals adopted by United Nations and hence by Ethiopia to properly address the issue of poverty (UN, 2015). To this end, Ethiopia is mobilizing its resources and efforts toward the achievement of such goals. The Ethiopian government has espoused, among others, conservation, and extension of national parks as a sustainable green development strategy to reduce poverty and hence to protect the environment. To do so the regional and the federal governments in Ethiopia worked much for the protection and extension of the Semien Mountains National Park along with the infrastructural facilities (ACTPDB, 2009).

The government being aware of the value of the parks unique landscape and the rich biodiversity along with the endangerment of endemic species dictated to establish close protection and

management of the park. However, by this time, the extension of the park is being conducted at the expense of the life of indigenous people of the area. This is now becoming the trend of parks conservation to boost tourism in Ethiopia in general (Jacobs and Schloeder, 2001; Teklu, 2006; Stellmacher, 2007; Abiyot, 2009; Stellmacher and Nolten, 2010; Zewdie, 2010; Asebe, 2011) and the Amhara regional state in particular at the expense of indigenous people who based their survival on these protected areas.

In spite of the occurrence and recurrence of displacement of people living in and around Semien Mountains National Park, the overwhelming portion of the literature on park focuses on human wildlife conflict in Ethiopia in general and Semien Mountains National Park in particular (Mesele, 2006; Afework et al., 2008; Mesele et al., 2008).

This research, however dealt with the questions that have much to do in displaying some of the facts associated with the life experiences and viewpoints of relocated communities from Arkwaziye village that lived so far in and around Semien Mountains National Park.

### **Research Methods**

This study used a qualitative research method with a cross-sectional study design. This study used both purposive and convenient sampling. The study area and the key informants were selected purposefully. The study area is selected because it is known for displacing numerous communities living in and adjacent to the park attributed to a number of factors. Similarly, key informants were selected purposefully due to their knowledge and exposure on the issue of park and park related issues. However, the target population (dislocated people) was selected conveniently due to their accessibility and proximity to the researcher.

The data were collected through primary and secondary sources. The primary sources of data were collected from in-depth interviews, personal observation and key informant interview. In-depth personal interviews were held with relocated peoples concerning government measures on conservation of national parks, poverty and environmental issues, their living conditions and participation in conservation and extension of parks, resettlement approaches and conditions of adaptation. An attempt of informed personal observations was also made at household level to observe the state of living, the socio-cultural and economic conditions of the local peoples. Key informant interview with experts who work on the park was conducted.

Secondary data were also gathered to gain brief insight about the park and its surrounding local people through previous works on Semien Mountains National Park with different parks of the country but with similar topics. Moreover, published, and unpublished documents of brochures and leaflets were reviewed.

Regarding ethical consideration, before the data collection, the researcher took an ethical clearance letter from the department of Social Anthropology, university of Gondar. Then communication was held with research participants regarding their permits. They were told to ignore to participate for any reason. Moreover, to make things clear the research objective as well as the benefits of the research was clearly presented to research participants.

### **Result and Discussion**

There are two approaches that countries in the world followed as far as the issue of the management of national parks is concerned. The first approach advocates the right of people to live and use parks resources (Harmon, 1991) while the second approach denounces people's interference in the parks (Kellert, 1986). The former approach considers the nature and benefits of the park's resources such as forests, water, fertile land, grazing land, grasses, minerals, and wildlife to the indigenous community.

Thus, the use of conservation of the park in which parks are protected excluding the indigenous peoples has resulted in adverse effects on food security and livelihood of people living in and around protected areas in developing countries (West and Brenchin, 1991).

Similarly, the Ethiopian national parks, conservation scheme is associated with exclusive conservation approaches, little effectiveness, and conflicts between local people living in or adjacent to

the parks and state authorities (Jacobs and Schloeder, 2001; Teklu, 2006; Stellmacher, 2007; Abiyot, 2009; Stellmacher and Nolten, 2010; Zewdie, 2010; Asebe, 2011).

In clarifying this fact the in-depth interview below reveals that:

*I am originally from arkwaziye. I have four children. As a result of the need for Semen Mountains National Park extension the government forces us to retreat from arkwasye village. We displaced from our land not because we the displaced people obstruct the biodiversities existence in the park which is not true. Rather, it is some people's interest to unimportantly, increase the Semen Mountains National Park size. So far I used to live via providing a type of traditional pension to rural travellers and selling tea and Tella. As a result, I was able to lead a good life by such business activity by that time. Nonetheless, by now I can not buy houses and lead my family as before.*

As seen in the above case and other similar in depth interview different groups of relocated people are conspicuously found facing the threat of landlessness, homelessness and hence poverty as a result of forceful displacement resulted from the establishment and extension of Semien Mountains National Park.

Similarly, 46 years old father noted his view in the following way:-

*As you see I am leading miserable way of life with my wife and children because we lost our base. The amount of compensation given to us is insignificant in comparison with what we compelled to sacrifice. Now we are leading very different way of life than we did before. I do think that this was happening to us because the government gave emphasis to the size of the park simply. The government gives much emphasis to animals than to the people. That is why they compelled us forcefully to leave for the sake of unnecessary, that I believe, extension of the Semien Mountains National Park.*

Similarly, another dislocated individual believed that the government blindly expands the territorial size of the park out of context. The size of the park is expanding year by year. I do not believe that the government is expanding the park's territory to reduce the endangerment of endemic species rather it is to make the area forest reserve and hence the home of animals. Concomitantly, the government is boosting in expanding the park than to do with finding strategies to sustain the lives of the surrounding community affected by the park existence.

As revealed the in depth interview the extension of the park is being conducted at the expense of the life of the indigenous people of the area. Particularly driven by a speculative mania for biodiversity and wildlife conservation, people living in and adjacent to the park were excluded from their native area as they were perceived as threats to the existence of the park. The dislocated individuals did not agree with the logic behind the park expansion. They it was through coercive manner that these communities were dislocated.

On the other hand, the government advocate and made effort in the establishment of close protection and management of the park due to the endangerment of endemic species, though the value of the park's unique landscape and the rich biodiversity plays its part. In doing so the government also advocates that the extension of the park was done via exhaustive but fruitful negotiation with the local community (Berihun, 2013).

An individual who have work experience on the Park as an expert on the other hand support the view points of the dislocated people. The communities were persuaded to accept the decision of the government option to be dislocated than to have a say of yes or no. Moreover, he believed that the government should have done the other to help the dislocated people to work as part and parcel of the park conservation being in their native homeland than the other way.

One of my in-depth interviewee recalled his experiences of life as follows.

*I am 53 years old. I have five children. I am dislocated from my home attributed to the forceful government demand of increment of Semien Mountains National Parks. Now I am leading a life via engaging in trading activity as before. But so far we adopted the environment since it was our homeland. Everybody knows us and we do have our customers. The case is now extremely difficult facing new people and new situations. Particularly my children were not able to adapt as we thought before. Now I feel that the*



*government pushes us harshly with a very insufficient compensation. While people in the debark town were allowed to engage in many activities in the park they did not help us to do the same thing for us.*

According to the in depth interview results, the government gives much emphasis to the town people to create work opportunity than in rural areas who were forced to migrate. It is unquestionable that tourism generates income. However, in the case of Semien Mountains National Park it neither benefit from the income gained from the native tourism attraction areas, nor does it enable them to have access to their former survival means. While the costs of living were borne by the local communities, however the benefit of biodiversity conservation ensued to the business men involved in many ways.

It is true that while people who lived in nearby towns like Debark (the centre for the bureau of Semien Mountains National Park) became the beneficiaries of the tourism industry from hotels, car rental, tour guiding, food preparation, equipment rental and militia scouting for tourists (ACTPDB, 2009) the indigenous users of the land who live in and around the Semien Mountains National Park faced extreme poverty due to the deprivation of economic gains what they did before the establishment and extension of the Semien Mountains National Park. The direct anticipated rational of Semien Mountains National Park establishment for the sake of biodiversity and wildlife protection and poverty reduction became unattainable and produced a controversy.

Similarly, an expert who worked on Semien Mountains National Park in Debark believed that:

*The case is true as being said by the dislocated people. He believed that the government gave emphasis to the economic benefits of the park as a whole than for what it gives to the native peoples who lived around Semien Mountains National Park in particular. Yes, it gave due consideration to ensure the safety of the tourists through organizing the town youths who are jobless. In this regard the government was able to help jobless youths in the town. On the other hand, I do believe that the government did not give due attention to the rural community who live in and around Semien Mountains National Park except helping them to give a militia service in rare cases.*

Thus, this leads to resettlement program carried out under the guise of protection of endangered species within the Semien Mountains National Park at the impoverishment and dispossession of the people. The residents who live even by far are by then leading their life simply with fear of losing their means of survival. This was because these people were an agriculturalist community who practiced both grain cultivation and animal husbandry. Even before its expansion, the park itself served as the area for their livestock grazing, hunting, and making of houses. However, this land was protected as an area of the park. This had affected the means of survival of the people living in and around Semen Mountain National Park.

## Conclusion

The Ethiopian government emphasis for economic development at any cost is hardly seeing people as part of an issue to be seen critically in the process. This is particularly true in Semien Mountains National Park, where blindfolded park extension highly detested the physical presence of long-established users for the sake of rigorous park conservation development. This is becoming in contradiction with the very presence of native land users. As a result, there is a dilemma among the people about the very importance of park expansion. Thus, the concerned body needs to work with people in an attempt to expand the park size.

## Abbreviations

ACTPDB - Amhara National Regional State Culture, Tourism and Parks Development Bureau, and UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

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